

Associate Paper

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The Australia-US Alliance: A Cost/Benefit Analysis

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Key Points

- It is time for a hard-headed cost/benefit analysis of the US Alliance. Any such analysis should include the following questions:
- Does the Alliance create more problems than it solves?
- In the Indo-Pacific Region, do we want a balance between the US and China, or US dominance?
- What intelligence do we get from the US that would still be needed without the Alliance?

Summary

The American alliance is an article of faith in Australia because it is said to underpin our security. There have been many reviews and White Papers but perhaps it is time for a hard-headed cost/benefit analysis. Here I consider some of the questions that must be asked.

Analysis

Australians have always been afraid of standing on their own two feet. We need a “sugar daddy” to protect us from a potentially hostile world. Britain was that protector until the British lion lost its teeth. We then turned to Uncle Sam, who is our current protector, but do we really need a protector? Australia and Singapore are the only countries in our immediate region whose armed forces are externally oriented. All the others in South-East Asia have a domestic capability directed primarily towards the suppression of internal unrest, although this also gives them a capability to defend themselves against foreign invasion. India is

developing a bluewater navy that could project power beyond its borders and China has a growing capability to operate outside its borders. North Korea is developing missiles that could reach South-East Asia. The only country capable of invading Australia, however, is the USA and not even the looniest lefty would suggest that they have any intention of attacking us. There is, therefore, no current external threat to the Australian continent and it is hard to see one emerging in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, in the 60 years that ANZUS has been in existence, there has been no threat of invasion to Australia. We do, however, also need to think about our lines of communication and trade with the outside world.

The Pros

So, the main argument for the alliance is based on the assumption that some currently unforeseen threat might emerge in the future which would require US intervention to protect us, either by coming to our aid directly or by providing a deterrent to a potential aggressor. While some people believe that China poses a future threat to Australia, most do not.

The second line of argument is that the US presence contributes to regional security and provides a balance to China and other potential hegemonic powers. It is said that most other countries in the region welcome this presence. Stability in the region protects our lines of communication.

The third benefit we get from the alliance is access to US intelligence, particularly technical capabilities, such as satellite imaging.

The Cons

If we want the US cavalry to come thundering over the hill in our hour of need, then we must pay the premiums. Supporting US military adventures is the price we pay. ANZUS does not require the US to defend Australia if we are attacked, only to think about it. Therefore, we have to keep reminding them that we are a loyal little ally deserving of their support. The alliance has got us into Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, none of which, arguably, has done us much good. There will be strong pressure from the US for us to join in other military adventures that do not necessarily serve Australian interests.

The US has made it clear that it wants to be the pre-eminent power in the region, yet China also sees itself as number one. We cannot assume that the current moderate US Administration will remain in power and we may find ourselves under great pressure to declare for the US against China. Even under a moderate administration, American policymakers expect us to follow where they lead.

Another downside of the alliance is that we are seen by many other countries as a client state of the US. This may increase the risk of terrorist attacks on Australia if it is seen as a proxy for the US.

If we are to support the US in its overseas ventures, our military planners face a major problem in working out what force structure to build. Where will they ask us to join them next?

Some Complexities

Does it really matter if other countries see us as clients of the Americans? It can be argued that being seen as such gives us some form of protection from potential aggressors, but it may also increase the risk of terrorist attacks on us. For example, North Korea might be tempted to lob a missile at us because we are seen as a proxy for the US. If we were not, why would they bother?

Some would argue that the sacrifices made by our troops in insurance premium wars are an argument against the alliance. Perhaps so, but these forays do provide valuable combat experience for our armed forces. No amount of training can substitute for the experience of battle, even though it involves casualties.

Do we receive reliable intelligence that tells us anything we really need to know that we could not get from other sources? Does this intelligence in any way further Australian interests? To answer this question we would need access to classified material that will probably not be released. It is worth noting, however, that US intelligence misled us on Iraq and presumably the Americans are not above doctoring what they give us in order to pursue American interests. While it may be hard to answer this question, we can ask, what kind of information do we need from the Americans to protect Australian interests? What intelligence do we get that we only need because of the alliance?

While the fall may be a long way off, the American Empire has begun its decline and the Chinese Empire is reasserting what it sees as its rightful place in the region. Many regional countries favour a balance between the two powers but we seem to be one of the few that wants an imbalance in favour of the US. The government has said that our alliance with the US (which we seem to be building up) is not directed against China. Of course, the government must say publicly that it is not directed against China, but are we fooling anyone? If not China, then who is it directed against?

Is it possible, as the new Foreign Minister Bob Carr has suggested, to keep the alliance but to adopt a more independent posture within it? Obviously, we want to maintain good relations with the US. The question here is how independent can we be while maintaining our image in the US as a dependable ally? It is perhaps instructive to note that the only time the US has sent a serious career ambassador (Marshall Green), to Australia was during the Whitlam years, when the US was concerned that we were becoming too independent. The others have been “friends of the President” who were given a comfortable job in return for domestic services rendered.

These are just some of the questions that need to be asked, but surely it is time to start asking them. It is one thing to remain a good friend, but too close an embrace will lead Americans and others to resurrect the “deputy sheriff” tag. The Americans have always put their own interests first and will continue to do so; we should follow their good example. American interests will not always be the same as Australian and vice versa.

The bottom line, however, is the domestic political one. Australians are afraid of the outside world and convinced of their inability to cope with it. Any Australian government which

suggested that we do without a great and powerful friend to look after us would have to consider the electoral implications.

About the Author: Cavan Hogue was Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative when Australia was last on the United Nations Security Council. He has also served as head of mission in Mexico, Kuala Lumpur, Moscow and Bangkok, as well as holding senior positions in other posts and in Canberra. He is now an Adjunct Professor in International Communication at Macquarie University, Sydney.

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